

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, January 29, 2023  
John 20:19-23; Matthew 28:16-20

“We Are What We Eat,” Part Four:  
Missionaries for God’s Reign

In the spirit of our present sermon series, here are a few food jokes:

- 1) What did the baby corn say to its mom? Where’s my popcorn?
- 2) What do you call a fake noodle? An impasta.
- 3) When potatoes have babies, what are they called? Tater tots.
- 4) How do you make an apple turnover? Push it downhill.
- 5) What’s better than a good friend? A good friend with chocolate.
- 6) What kind of socks do you need to plant asparagus? Garden hose.
- 7) Why did the skeleton go to the barbecue? To get another rib.
- 8) What do you call it when you have a cookie in each hand? A balanced diet.
- 9) Wanna hear a joke about pizza? Never mind it’s too cheesy.

The first three sermons in this series have focused on some of the things we need to eat in order to be spiritually healthy and alive, namely worship, word, and fellowship. If we are what we eat, this morning we’re going to focus on what “we are” or what we become when we eat those things. Spiritually healthy, yes. But more than that. Far more. When we eat those spiritual foods that make us healthy and alive, we are—or we become—nothing less than missionaries for God’s reign!

After Jesus’ resurrection, but just before his ascension, one of the last things he did was that he gave his disciples a mission. (Or we could call it a “commission.”) This morning, we’ve heard two accounts of that commissioning, one from the Gospel of John, and the other from Matthew. The one from John is so short that it’s easy to overlook it. But I want to point out just a few things.

**First**, notice that the disciples were afraid [*“When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews.” 20:19*]. Make that very afraid. Afraid that what had happened to Jesus would happen to them. What are we afraid might happen to us if we unlock our doors, literally and figuratively?

**Second**, *“Jesus came [to them], and stood among them.”* Do we recognize Jesus, here in our very midst?

**Third**, Jesus *said to them, “Peace be with you.”* Not once, but twice. Do we understand the importance of peace?

**Fourth**, he also said to them, *“As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”*

And **fifth**, *he breathed on them, and into them, the Holy Spirit.* Have we breathed into ourselves the Holy Spirit yet today? Let’s do it together [breathe].

But hold on! Let’s back up to number four just a minute. Because it’s really quite astonishing. *“As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”* Do we get what Jesus is saying?! That he is now sending us in the same way that God sent him? Which would seem to imply that he wants us to carry on his ministry? And, it might get us killed?”

Interestingly, the verb “send” is Latin is *missio*. As in our word “mission.” So we could paraphrase this incredible verse from the Gospel of John, “Just as the Father sent me on a mission, so I am now sending you on a mission.” Or, “Just as God sent me to be his missionary, so I am now sending you to be his missionaries.”

Wow! Sending where? Well, out. Out from this place. Out from these four walls. Out into the world.

And then, after Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit into them, he said, “*If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.*” There is so much to unpack there. But essentially Jesus is saying that he’s giving his disciples, and us, his own authority. Double wow! It’s overwhelming! What are we supposed to do with all that authority? Jesus doesn’t specify. Not here, at least.

Which brings us to this morning’s passage from the Gospel of Matthew. The same gospel that has the Beatitudes, and the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, and all those parables about God’s kingdom, God’s reign.

*Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee.* No longer twelve. No longer the “complete set,” biblically speaking. No longer perfect (not that they ever were). But they were complete enough, and good enough.

They go “*to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.*” Which mountain, we’re left to guess. There are a lot of mountains in Matthew. Could be the one where he gave the Sermon on the Mount, in which he taught them all about God’s Reign. How counter cultural it is, how countercultural his disciples are called to be. Could be the one where he first healed the blind and the lame, and as if that wasn’t miraculous enough, he then fed a hungry crowd of four thousand. Could be the one where he took just Peter, James, and John, and was transfigured before them. And then told them to not be afraid. Whichever mountain the disciples go to now in order to find him, the risen Jesus was there.

“*When they saw him, they worshiped him.*” Fell at his feet. As if they finally and fully understood who he was. Raised their hands in praise. (Remember how important worship is? How it reminds us who God is, and who we are in relation to God?)

And then Matthew adds these next three words: “*but some doubted.*” What is Matthew saying? That doubt and faith and obedience go hand in hand? Even after the Resurrection?

And then Matthew says, “*and Jesus came*” (remember John 20:19, where Jesus “came and stood among them?”), “and Jesus came *and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”* Given by God, of course. The Creator of heaven and earth. All of that Creator’s authority has now been given to Jesus.

“*Go, therefore.*” He’s sending them. Remember John 20:21? “As the Father has sent me, so I send you?”) *Missio*. And where does Jesus want them to go? Out. Into the world. And what are they supposed to do? What is their mission (or commission)?

Matthew gives us more details. “*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.*”

Everything that he has commanded and taught them? That’s a lot. That’s more than just the Sermon on the Mount. That’s the entire Gospel of Matthew. (Which is why they and we need to keep eating and chewing the word. So we remember it. So we know it. So we understand it.)

“Teaching them to obey.” Not just to believe, notice. (Which admittedly is what the Gospel of John and much of evangelical Christianity emphasizes.) “To obey.” Teaching them about discipleship. What it means to follow Jesus. What it looks like. What life in the Kingdom of God looks like. What the Reign of God looks like. That was their mission. That is our mission.

One of the most important books I ever read (in my 65 years of life) was in seminary, and it’s called Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America. Here it is. With lots of underlining! It’s edited by Darrell Guder. Who is not even Mennonite! It’s way, way bigger than just the Mennonites! And the different writers represented in this book (one of whom is Mennonite, by the way) all say, over and over, that the mission of the Church is really quite simple. It is to go out, into the world, and to be a sign of the Reign of God. And what is a sign? What does it do? It points to. It gives directions to. “The Kingdom of God is this way.” Or even, “the Kingdom of God is here. This is what it looks like.”

The different writers all emphasize that everything we say and do should be a sign. Everything we say and do should be considered part of our mission. Meat canning and peppernuts, sure, but not just that. Everything. Meetings. Meals. Worship. Even casual conversation. How we are together is all part of our mission. The world “out there” is watching, and it is listening.

As I said, it’s way bigger than Mennonites, and even MCC. But I want to add that one thing Mennonites understand perhaps better than most is the importance of peace. Peace, and everything that contributes to it, is absolutely central to the Gospel, to the Kingdom or Reign of God. “Peace be with you,” Jesus says to his disciples, right before he sends them. It’s like he’s breathing that into us as well.

As you all know, we have a mission statement at FMC. It’s printed on every bulletin, every Sunday of every year. It says, “*In Christ—Making Disciples through Loving Relationships.*” It’s a good one. It says a lot. And it also begs some really good questions, namely what does it mean to be “in Christ.” What does it mean to “make disciples.” And what exactly are loving relationships? What do they look like?

It’s a good statement! But I wonder whether it might be time to write a new mission statement! One that fits who God is calling you to be and to do. Not yesterday, but today. In this time, and in this place. May the Risen Christ give you the guidance you need.

Amen.

Our closing song sets to music parts of the Sermon on the Mount. And, it is written by Marty Haugen, who also wrote today’s opening hymn, “Let Us Build a House.” And he’s not even Mennonite! (“You Are Salt for the Earth,” VT 297)